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## THE TRADITIONAL ORIGIN AND THE NAMING OF THE SENECA NATION

BY FREDERICK HOUGHTON

WHEN the Senecas first became known to Europeans they lived in a few large towns in the fertile country of what is now New York between the Genesee River and Canandaigua Lake. Traders, explorers and missionaries visited them there and described them as being well established in permanent towns. Seemingly they were autochthonous there, or, at least, their occupancy was of long standing. That they believed this is evidenced by a tradition according to which they originated in that delightful region.

The tradition of the origin of the Seneca Nation in the central New York valleys has reached us through a source which must be considered authoritative, for it was recorded as it fell from the lips of a white captive of the Senecas, one who had lived amongst them for a long lifetime. This captive was Mary Jamison, the "White Woman of the Genesee," or to give her the appellation bestowed upon her during her adoption ceremonies, Deh-he-wam-is.

Mary Jamison was the daughter of an Irish settler, one of those hardy souls who in the middle of the eighteenth century settled on the remote frontier in the valleys of northwestern Pennsylvania. She was captured by a Shawnee war party and taken to the Seneca town of She-nan-je, on the Allegheny River, where she was adopted by two Seneca women. A few years later she married a Delaware, and upon his death, which occurred after two children had been born to her, she married a Seneca. She reared a family of children and after a life of hardship, such as was incident to the Senecas during the stormy period of the American Revolution, she died in a cabin on the Buffalo Creek Reservation. In her old age she told the story of her life to Mr.

James E. Seaver, who published it. In this biography occurs incidentally the Seneca tradition of the beginnings of the nation.

As transcribed by Mr. Seaver this is as follows:

The tradition of the Seneca Indians, in regard to their origin, is that they broke out of the earth from a large mountain at the head of Canandaigua Lake; and that mountain they still venerate as the place of their birth. Thence they derive their name, "Ge-nun-de-wah," or "Great Hills," and are called "The Great Hill People," which is the true definition of the word Seneca.

The great hill at the head of Canandaigua Lake, from whence they spring, is called Genundewah, and has for a long time past been the place where the Indians of that nation have met in council, to hold great talks, and to offer up prayers to the Great Spirit, on account of its having been their birthplace; and, also, in consequence of the destruction of a serpent at that place in ancient time, in a most miraculous manner, which threatened the destruction of the whole of the Senecas, and barely spared enough to commence replenishing the earth.

The Indians say, that the fort on the big hill, or Ge-nun-de-wah, near the head of Canandaigua Lake, was surrounded by a monstrous serpent, whose head and tail came together at the gate. A long time it lay there, confounding the people with its breath. At length they attempted to make their escape some with their hominy blocks, and others with different implements of household furniture; and in marching out of the fort walked down the throat of the serpent. Two orphan children, who had escaped this general destruction by being left on this side of the fort were informed, by an oracle, of the means by which they could get rid of their formidable enemy—which was, to take a small bow and a poisoned arrow, made of a kind of willow, and with that shoot the serpent under its scales. This they did, and the arrow proved effectual; for, on penetrating the skin, the serpent became sick, and, extending itself, rolled down the hill, destroying all the timber that was in its way, disgorging itself, and breaking wind greatly as it went. At every motion a human head was discharged, and rolled down the hill into the lake where they lie at this day in a petrified state, having the hardness and appearance of stones; and the Pagan Indians of the Senecas believe, that all the little snakes were made of the blood of the great serpent, after it rolled into the lake.

To this day, the Indians visit that sacred place to mourn the loss of their friends, and to celebrate some rites that are peculiar to themselves. To the knowledge of white people, there has been no timber on the great hill since it was first discovered by them, though it lay apparently in a state of nature for a great number of years without cultivation. Stones in the shape of Indians' heads may be seen lying in the lake in great plenty, which are said to be the same that were deposited there at the death of the serpent.

The Senecas have a tradition, that previous to, and for some time after their origin at Genundewah, the country, especially about the lakes, was thickly inhabited by a race of civil, enterprising, and industrious people,

who were totally destroyed by the great serpent that afterwards surrounded the great hill fort, with the assistance of others of the same species; and that they (the Senecas) went into possession of the improvements that were left.

In those days the Indians throughout the whole country as the Senecas say, spoke one language; but having become considerably numerous, the before-mentioned great serpent, by an unknown influence, confounded their language, so that they could not understand each other; which was the cause of their division into nations—as the Mohawks, Oneidas, etc. At that time, however, the Senecas retained the original language, and continued to occupy their mother hill, on which they fortified themselves against their enemies, and lived peaceably, until having offended the serpent, they were cut off as I have before remarked.

An interesting variant of this tradition was given by Cone, a Seneca of the Tonawanda band, to Henry A. S. Dearborn, Commissioner for Massachusetts, at a council held on the Buffalo Creek Reservation in 1838. Cone informed him

that there was a tradition amongst the Senecas, that their nation was at one period established in a large village on a high hill, with a spacious broad flat top, near the southern end of Seneca Lake; and to more effectually defend their commanding position, the sides of the hill were cleared of all the trees and shrubs, so that an enemy could not advance without being exposed to view and attack.

Thereafter is a story of the great serpent which encircled the hill, and a tradition explaining the meaning of their name. In this Cone said, “For the mountain residence of the Senecas, and from whence they date the origin of their nation (sic) their original name was Jo-no-do-van or Great Mountain, but it ultimately was changed to Non-do-wan-gan which is the present Indian name of the Tribe.”

In this story the hill has been shifted from Canandaigua Lake to Seneca Lake, but the name is still derived from the ancestral hill.

This serpent story is common to others of the Iroquoian family. An almost identical story was told (in 1912) by Catherine Johnson, a Wyandot, residing at Wyandotte, Oklahoma.

In this story a boy found a small snake which he kept as a pet and fed until it grew to enormous size. Finally it devoured the boy, blockaded the only path to the Wyandot village, and swallowed the people as they tried to escape. A boy and a girl

who lived outside the village were the only survivors, and this boy finally killed the serpent.<sup>1</sup>

Emanating from one who must have been thoroughly familiar with the story in its Seneca form, and seemingly corroborated by the actual residence of the Senecas in the immediate vicinity of the traditional birth place of the nation, Mary Jamison's story has been accepted without question as the correct native origin legend. Other authors have quoted it until it has become a settled belief amongst those interested, that the Seneca Nation did actually originate in the Canandaigua Valley.

This tradition has to do with two main subjects, (1) the origin of the nation, or rather the origin of the Iroquois, and (2) the separation of the nations of the Confederacy. Each of these may be examined by itself.

Separated from its context, and somewhat simplified, the story of their origin is as follows:

The Senecas believed that they broke out of the earth at a great, treeless mountain at the head of Canandaigua Lake. They were preceded in their occupancy of the country by a race of "civil, enterprising and industrious people." Their name was derived from this hill. They met there later in councils.

According to the story of their separation, the village of the Senecas on their ancestral hill was surrounded by a serpent which destroyed all who attempted to escape. This beast was killed by a boy. So terrified were the survivors that they scattered and became the five nations constituting the League. In the struggles of the serpent it broke down all the trees on the hill and this treeless condition became permanent.

The portion of the story centering about their origin may be further divided into two parts. The first deals with the origin of the nation, the second with the origin of the name. The first makes the Senecas break out of the earth at a great treeless mountain at the head of Canandaigua Lake. According to the second part their tribal name, Genundewa, was derived from this emergence from the great hill.

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<sup>1</sup> Geol. Survey of Canada, Mem. 80, p. 146.

In localizing this tradition the bareness of the ancestral hill has appealed to every author, and this has connected it naturally with a hill on the east side of Canandaigua Lake, six miles below its head, which from its treeless condition has been named Bare Hill. That this treeless condition has existed there for a long time there can be no doubt. The first settlers recorded that they were under no necessity of clearing it and were enabled to plant at once. It has been stated, upon what authority no one seems to know, that a fort once existed on its top, but of this fort there now exists no vestige.

That the Seneca Nation established a village on or near Bare Hill seems unsupported by historical or archaeological evidence. So far as is known there is no village at or near Bare Hill which can be ascribed to an early pre-European Iroquoian people. There is a site at Vine Valley, at the foot of the hill, and from the graves of this site numerous articles have been taken, but this is undoubtedly non-Iroquoian and therefore necessarily not Seneca. Mr. Parker, the New York State Archaeologist, makes a statement regarding these articles which bears directly upon their origin. He says, "the culture represented is similar to that of moundbuilding Indians of New York and Ohio."<sup>2</sup> It seems to be the site of a village of non-Iroquoian people, possibly Algonkian, or a wandering band from the lower Ohio River, part perhaps of the "civil, enterprising and industrious people" whom the Senecas found living there.

Following the tradition, Mr. D. D. Luther, a geologist in the New York State Education Department, endeavored to localize the origin of the Senecas, in an article entitled "Nundawao, the oldest Seneca village." He followed other writers in identifying the ancestral hill with Bare Hill, but he separated the village from the hill by assigning the "oldest village" to the vicinity of Naples six miles away. He based his article upon certain artifacts which he had collected near Naples, and upon the fact that a historic Seneca village had once existed there. But this Seneca village was the village Koyendage known to have been established there during the Revolutionary period and until the first

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<sup>2</sup> Bulletin N. Y. State Ed. Dept., 173, p. 100.

settlers arrived, and is thus of very late, post-European times; and the articles which he found are mainly of undoubted non-Iroquoian type, collected from two small camp sites on the flood-plain of West River. Of them Mr. Parker reports, "Mr. D. D. Luther during the year sent in 440 specimens from an early Algonkian site near Naples, Yates County." Without doubt, then, this site can not be the prehistoric ancestral village where the Senecas originated. Yet unfortunately the United States Bureau of American Ethnology in its "Handbook of American Indians" accepts Mr. Luther's statement without question and states definitely that "when first known they occupied that part of w. New York between Seneca Lake and Geneva (sic) r. having their council fire at Tsonnontowan near Naples in Ontario County." (Hewitt.)

It is doubtful whether Mary Jamison, when she alluded to the great mountain at the head of Canandaigua Lake, had in her mind Bare Hill, though ever since it has been identified with the hill of the tradition. She says only that it was at the head of the lake and that it was bare. Bare Hill is not at the head of the lake, although it is treeless. Yet other hills at the head of the lake would have answered the description of bareness equally well. Sutton (1851), quoting Parrish in his "Annals of Naples," says, "The lofty hills on either side of Koyendage were so destitute of timber that a deer might plainly be seen from one extreme end to the other." Koyendage was the Seneca village which the first settlers found on the present site of Naples. This village was a gathering place for councils and so further answers the description of the ancestral village which was a meeting place for that purpose. On the other hand, no council is known to have been held at or near Bare Hill. There seems then every reason to suppose that the great mountain of the tradition was not Bare Hill but one of the hills which encircle the valley at the head of Canandaigua Lake.

"Thence they derived their name Ge-nun-de-wah or Great Hill." The earliest mention of the name by which the Senecas were known to themselves and their Iroquois kin was by Champ-lain who received it from the Hurons. His rendering of it was

"Chonontouarouons." Later the French called them Sonnontrerrhonons. Mary Jamison's rendering, as transcribed by Mr. Seaver, was "Ge-nun-de-wah." These renderings, and many others with different spelling, are imperfect renderings of the Iroquois name for the people whom we know by an imperfect Algonkian name as Senecas. Their Iroquois name was "Djiionondowanen," meaning "the people of the great mountain." The reference seems to be, not so much to a great hill, as to the fact that the people were hill people, mountaineers, and this sense is preserved in the language of the Delawares who knew them as Maechiachtinni, great mountain people. It is evidently not a mere coincidence that their towns almost invariably crowned high hills, and the name "hill people" may reasonably be supposed to be derived from a long residence amongst high hills.

In fact every evidence seems to point to the migration of the Senecas into central New York from the high hills of Chautauqua County, and it seems probable that the "oldest Seneca village" instead of being at the head of Canandaigua Lake must be looked for much farther west.

The origin of the Seneca Nation as a nation is unknown. That it was a nation and, as such, an important constituent of the Iroquois Confederacy when it was first known to the Europeans is an historic fact. How long the people known to us as Senecas had been banded together before the formation of the Confederacy, and where these people were seated when they crystallized into a nation can never be known. This much is known, however, that strong Seneca villages existed in pre-European times, as far south as the upper valley of the Genesee River and as far west, at least, as the Conewango valley. It is an undoubted fact, also, that these people were immigrants into central New York, moving from the west toward the east into a country already occupied by a different people.

That portion of the tradition pertaining to the origin of the Senecas seems to be an attempt on their part to account for their name, yet it may be entirely possible that there may be a grain of truth in it and that at the head of Canandaigua Lake different bands of them then moving slowly from the valleys about the

heads of the lakes banded together into the nation which later was to become one member of the great Confederacy.

The Huron branch of the Iroquoian family had a tradition of the migrations of the Senecas. Of this tradition several versions are recorded by Mr. Barbeau.<sup>3</sup> According to two versions of this tradition the Wyandots (Hurons) and the Senecas lived peaceably together along the St. Lawrence near Montreal. According to one version they were established near Lake Ontario. While there an old chief refused to allow a Seneca girl to marry a young Seneca warrior. In revenge she married a Wyandot on condition that he would kill the old Seneca chief. This he did and there resulted the condition of warfare which existed when Champlain first met the Hurons. In the beginning of the war the Wyandots moved westward to the Niagara but they were driven thence to the territory about Georgian Bay where they were found by Champlain. The Senecas then occupied the land about the Niagara River.

The first allusion to the Seneca nation in a European narrative was made by Samuel de Champlain in his description of his voyage of 1615. In that year he had made the difficult journey from his newly established post at Quebec to the villages of the Hurons, in the country southeast of Georgian Bay to which they had been driven. These persuaded him to join a war party against their enemies, the Entouhonorons, an Iroquoian people south of Lake Ontario. The Hurons wished the aid of an allied nation, the "Carantouannais," and to secure their cooperation Champlain sent one of his men, Etienne Brulé, to their town, Carantouan. Brulé was obliged to pass through or around the country of an enemy nation, the name of which Champlain recorded as "Chouontouarouons." That this was the Seneca nation can hardly be doubted. Carantouan was situated on a river which flowed southward, and which Brulé afterward explored to the sea. This was certainly the Susquehanna. To reach the Susquehanna from Huronia Brulé must have passed through or around the country of the Sonnotouans, our Senecas, who thus seem to be identical with Champlain's Chouontouarouons.

<sup>3</sup> "Huron and Wyandot Mythology," Memoir 80, Geological Survey, Canada.

The name "Sonnontouan" was not applied to the nation until 1635. In that year Father Brebeuf, then resident missionary amongst the Hurons, noted a war then existing between the Hurons and the "Sononterrhonons," and the same year he included them in a list of Iroquoian nations, kindred to the Hurons. From this time onward the French usually applied this name to the nation though many ways of spelling it were in common use. As already stated Mary Jamison sounded it as "Ge-nun-de-wah." In 1771 Lewis Evans placed on his map the name "Chenandowanes" as the name of an Indian village on the Genesee River.

The term "Sonontouan" was never used by the Dutch of New Netherlands and seldom by their successors, the English. Both of these employed the Algonkian name "Seneca," a term originally applied by the Algonkian people along Hudson River to all the Iroquoian nations west of them. The use of this Algonkian term for an Iroquoian nation is now firmly fixed, not only amongst our own people, but amongst the "Senecas" themselves, being employed at least when they are speaking the English language, and it was perpetuated officially by their use of it when they incorporated under the laws of New York as "The Seneca Nation of Indians."

The first use of the name "Senecas" by Europeans occurs on a map which was appended to a report submitted to the States General of the Netherlands in 1616. It is placed a little southwest of the name "Maquas" (Mohawks), and this peculiarity of situation requires a somewhat detailed explanation.

The information appearing upon this map is a direct consequence of the desire of certain merchants of the Netherlands to extend their trade to new markets and to the efforts of the States General to promote this new and extended trade. In 1606 William Usselincx brought before the States General a plan for a company to trade to the west coast of Africa and the east coast of America. This plan was favorably thought of but was not acted upon at that time. In 1609 Henry Hudson, then in the employ of the Dutch East India Company, attempted to find a passage through the continent of America to India, by exploring

the river known to the Spaniards at that time as the San Antonio but which later was named after the great explorer himself. A map of this had been made in 1571 by a Portuguese map maker, but neither Spain nor Portugal had made any attempt to follow up their explorations by trading or colonizing. In the delightful and populous country described by Hudson the Dutch merchants saw an opportunity, not only to extend their trade but to hamper the activities of their enemies, the Spaniards, and during the next five years several trading and exploring expeditions to the Hudson and the St. Lawrence Rivers were fitted out in Dutch ports. Those merchants who were most interested in these voyages wished to obtain a monopoly of commerce with the new lands, a monopoly designed to reimburse them for their necessary expenditures in exploring. In 1614 the States General drew up a General Charter under the provisions of which any person or company who discovered any new lands was allowed a monopoly of trade with those lands for four years. This was immediately followed by the formation of the West India Company, to which was granted for three years the exclusive right to trade with the newly explored country to be named New Netherlands. In order to have this monopoly extended, the company merely had to send out exploring parties from time to time and report immediately to the States General, and accordingly the Company's agents were under orders to extend their explorations as far into the hinterland as possible. One of these agents, Captain Cornelis Hendrickson (Hendrixen or Henricxsen), explored the coast carefully from Rhode Island to Delaware Bay and made his report in August, 1616. Appended to this report was a "Figurative Map," the data for which were supplied partly by Captain Hendrickson, partly by a certain "Kleynties" who with two others furnished all the data for that portion of the hinterland lying west of the Hudson and the Delaware Rivers. No written record of the journey of this "Kleynties" now exists, and it can only be inferred from the map upon which he recorded the data obtained. He is alluded to, however, in Hendrickson's report as follows:

He also traded for and bought from the inhabitants, the Minquaes, three persons, being people belonging to this Company; which three persons

were employed in the service of the Mohawks and Mahicans; giving for them kettles, beads and merchandize.

Evidently, then, amongst the trader-explorers sent out by the Company to extend their explorations westward were Kleynties and his two companions who were then in the service of the Mohawks and Mahicans, presumably at the new post, Fort Nassau. These men left their post, under orders, and explored westward and southward. They were captured by Minquas and carried by them to the coast or to the Delaware River where they were ransomed by Captain Hendrickson, who, under similar orders, was engaged in exploring the coast from the Hudson River southward. Kleynties furnished to a map maker in Holland a detailed account of his journey and this was used to supplement a map based upon the explorations of Captain Hendrickson. The information was gained at first hand and was accurate, and the map based upon it was equally accurate. On this map, as has been said, the name "Senecas" appears for the first time. That the Sonnontouans were meant is a natural inference, yet an examination of the map shows plainly that this inference is wrong.

Starting at a post on the Hudson amongst the Mahicans, probably Nassau (near Albany), the only post noted by Kleynties, they visited the Mohawk towns on the Mohawk River. That they went overland is evident by the fact that they left blank the junction of the Mohawk and the Hudson, of which they seem to have been ignorant. That this overland short cut, probably the present road between Albany and Schenectady, was the usual road is shown by Van Curler who used the same route in 1634.

From the Mohawk villages they went southwest to "Versch water," a lake from which a large river flowed southward. On a modern map Lake Otsego at once presents itself as corresponding to this "Versch water," not so large by far as Kleynties thought it was; though he evidently saw but one end of it for he left the other blank. He descended the southward flowing river which was the Susquehanna of our maps, passed three considerable branches which entered it from the west, and finally passed a still larger branch at the head of which he located the "Senecas." On

a modern map the Unadilla River answers this description. As to who these "Senecas" were we will learn presently. Meanwhile follow Kleynties down the river to a still larger tributary from the west on which were seated the "Gachos." The Chenango seems to answer this description. His main river now turns towards the west and at its most westerly bend another tributary enters it on which are located the "Capitannasses." This coincides exactly with the Chemung which enters the Susquehanna at the point where it turns from its western course to its southerly course through Pennsylvania. Far back in the hills west of the river he located the "Iottecas." Farther south he entered the territory of the Minquas and, willingly or unwillingly, he proceeded down the river to a large tributary which entered from the east. He may have been, probably was, taken up Lackawanna Creek which he lays down in detail, and over the divide to the Delaware. There he was found and bought by Captain Hendrickson. The news of the capture of these men reached Champlain in 1615, he having learned it indirectly from the Carantouan allies of his Huron hosts in Canada.

The identity of the "Senecas" whom Kleynties located on the headwaters of the Unadilla River is shown by Arent Van Curler who met them in 1634. In that year he visited the Mohawks, then grouped in villages along the Mohawk River near the present Canajoharie and after a short visit amongst them he proceeded to the villages of another Iroquoian people whom he called the "Sinnekens." On his way he crossed a "kill that as the savages told me ran into the lands of the Minquaass." This could only have been a tributary of the Unadilla River. While amongst these "Sinnekens" he learned and applied their Iroquoian name which to him sounded like "Enneyuttehage." This word is equivalent to our word Oneida, and these Oneidas, the Enneyuttehage or Sinnekens of Van Curler, were the same "Senecas" of whom Kleynties had learned, and whom he had located in the same place.

Our application of the Algonkian term "Sinnekens" or "Senecas" to the Sonnontouans is consequent upon the Dutch use of the word to denote any of the New York Iroquois, not Mohawks.

When Dutch traders first entered the Hudson River they met only the Algonkian nations seated along its lower course. From these they learned the names of other neighboring nations, amongst them the Iroquois nation known to the Algonkian tribes as Maquas, Mahaquas, or Mohawks, the first of the Iroquois to come into contact with the Dutch traders. Before they met, the Dutch had already learned of these Mohawks by their Algonkian appellation and they continued to use it. Very soon, however, trading parties from other and unknown Iroquoian nations to the west of the Mohawks began to appear. These were grouped by the Mahicans under the general term "Sinneken," and the Dutch adopted this name to include all Iroquois not Mohawks. Not until 1634 did the Dutch learn and adopt the Iroquois names of the two nations of "Sinnekens" next west of the Mohawks, these being the Oneidas and the Onondagas. The general name "Sinnekens" then became restricted to the still more remote Goyoguens and Sonnontouans. Later still the Goyouguens became known by their Iroquoian name which has come down to us as Cayugas, leaving the name Senecas applied only to the most remote nation of the Confederacy, the Sonnontouans. Before the term Sonnontouan became known, or at least before it was officially applied, New Netherland was taken over by the English who adopted the Dutch names and used them in all official business. To the English, therefore, the Sonnontouans were Senecas, and the name Seneca thus applied was perpetuated, although occasionally they were called "Sinnowane," seemingly a crude combination of "Sinnekens" and "Sonnontowans."

BUFFALO, N. Y.